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Fort de Chartres

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Fort de Chartres

Fort de Chartres is the last of three eighteenth-century forts by that name erected near the Mississippi River by France's colonial government. From 1720 to 1763 French administration of the Illinois Country was centered at the forts, built successively over a 40-year period on or near the same site. The stone fort, built in the 1750s and abandoned in 1771, has been partially reconstructed to provide a glimpse of life in Illinois under the French regime. Fort de Chartres State Historic Site, which also preserves the archaeological remains of the earlier wooden forts, is managed by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.



Reconstructed stone bastion

The Illinois Country

For more than a century beginning in 1673, France claimed the Illinois Country, an undefined area that extended from lakes Michigan and Superior to the Ohio and Missouri rivers. French leaders hoped that the Illinois Country, which was governed from distant Canada, would be a rich source of furs and precious metals. To better exploit those riches, the French in 1718 reorganized the administration of their

American possessions. The Illinois Country was removed from Canadian jurisdiction and made a part of Louisiana. Government of the vast territory was turned over to the Company of the Indies, a commercial enterprise chartered by King Louis XV. The company's power was considerable; it was granted a trade monopoly, given jurisdiction over all forts, posts, and garrisons and empowered to appoint all officials. In December 1718 the newly organized government at New Orleans sent a contingent of army officers, government officials, company employees, mining engineers, workmen, and soldiers to establish civil government in the Illinois Country. French leaders also hoped that a military presence would pacify the Fox Indians, whose frequent attacks put great pressure on French villages. Workmen soon began constructing a wooden fort on the Mississippi River eighteen miles north of Kaskaskia.

Two Wooden Stockades

French officials named their stockade Fort de Chartres in honor of Louis duc de Chartres, son of the regent of France. The fort was completed in 1720. Located "about a musket shot" from the Mississippi River, the fort consisted of a palisade of squared logs surrounded by a dry moat. Bastions built at diagonally opposite corners provided cover fire for each of the walls. Several buildings occupied the fort's interior, including a storehouse and countinghouse used by the Indies Company. Another building probably served the Provincial Council, which conducted the affairs of the king and the company. The fort, subject to frequent flooding, deteriorated rapidly.

Work on a new fort began about 1725. Built inland from the Mississippi, the new log stockade was about 160 feet square and had bastions at each corner. Four

buildings were located inside the fort, at least one of which was used by the Indies Company. The bastions contained other structures, among them a powder magazine, a prison, and a stable. Outside the fort stood a small chapel and a few private residences.

The Company of the Indies was gone by 1731, a victim of bad management, poor relations with Indian tribes, and its failure to discover the expected gold and other precious metals. In January of that year, the company turned Louisiana and its government back to the king. The fort's condition was precarious. In bad repair as early as 1742, its garrison was moved to Kaskaskia five years later.

A Stone Fortress

French leaders had discussed building a stone fort to protect their interests on the Mississippi River since the 1730s. Though the region failed to yield precious metals, holding the Illinois Country was deemed essential for trade and defense. Profitable deposits of lead had been discovered on the west bank of the Mississippi. More importantly, rich bottom land produced bountiful crops that made the region Louisiana's breadbasket.



The restored powder magazine is the only surviving structure from the third Fort de Chartres.

Construction of the new fort was delayed, however, while the government debated its location. Officials in New Orleans desired a site near Kaskaskia



A technique called ghosting outlines the dimensions of two structures—the East Barracks and the Government House (above).

(founded in 1703), the area's most prominent community. The local commandant disagreed, arguing for a location on the Mississippi near the earlier wooden forts. Extended correspondence resulted in a final decision to build the new stone structure a short distance from its predecessor. A lack of skilled workmen caused further delay. Fort engineer Francois Saucier complained in late 1752 that two stonemasons and a carpenter had deserted and that officials in New Orleans had not yet sent competent replacements.

Construction, once it began, proceeded slowly. Limestone was quarried from the bluffs north of Prairie du Rocher and conveyed across a small lake by raft before it was hauled to the site by oxen. Although Governor Kerlerec reported to superiors in 1754 that construction was substantially completed, major work continued for several years. In June 1760 Louisiana's chief fiscal officer reported that the fort would be completed by year's end.

The stone Fort de Chartres served as France's Illinois Country headquarters for only ten years. France surrendered Illi-

nois, along with most of its North American possessions, to Great Britain in the 1763 Treaty of Paris that ended the Seven Years' War. British troops of the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment took possession of Fort de Chartres on October 10, 1765, in a carefully choreographed transfer ceremony.

The British made little use of their new possession, which they renamed Fort Cavendish. Military engineers attempted to control erosion caused by the Mississippi, which already threatened to swallow the south wall. But British military leaders in North America soon deemed the fort of little practical value and ordered it abandoned in 1771, ending its use as a military post.

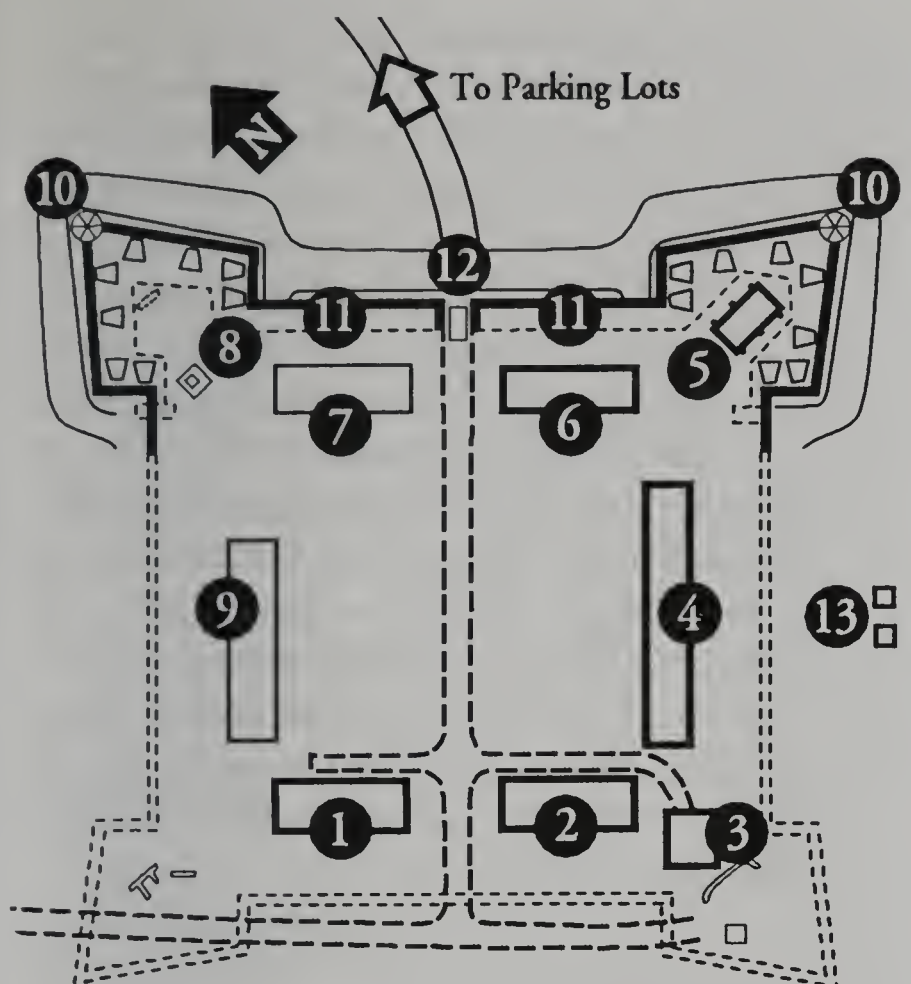
Decay and Reconstruction

The futility of controlling the river's erosion of the fort was underscored in 1772, when the south wall and bastions collapsed into the Mississippi. In the 1820s visitors noted trees growing in the walls and buildings, which began to literally disappear as local residents scavenged stone and timber to serve as material for other structures. By 1900 none of the wall existed above ground level and all of the buildings, save the powder magazine, had vanished completely.

In 1913 the Illinois legislature authorized the purchase of the stone fort site. The crumbling powder magazine, the only surviving military structure, was restored about 1917. Workers in the 1920s exposed portions of the building and wall foundations, a process continued in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration, which reconstructed the gateway and two stone buildings.

The Fort Today

Today visitors to the site see a partially rebuilt eighteenth-century fort. The north



- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Museum and Office | 7. Commandant's House |
| 2. Guards Building, includes
Guards Room, Priest
Room, Chapel, and
Storage Loft | 8. Well |
| 3. Concession Stand | 9. West Barracks |
| 4. East Barracks ("Ghosted") | 10. Bastions and Sentry Boxes
(Restored) |
| 5. Powder Magazine
(Original Building) | 11. Walls (Restored) |
| 6. Government / Officers
Building ("Ghosted") | 12. Gate |
| | 13. Necessaries (Restrooms) |
-
- | | |
|------------------|--------------|
| Restored Walls | ————— |
| Unrestored Walls | ----- |

wall, complete with bastions and gatehouse, contains musket ports and embrasures for cannon. In the east bastion stands the rebuilt powder magazine, considered by many to be the oldest building in Illinois. Other structures on the fort's interior include the guard's house and the king's storehouse. The storehouse is home to the fort's museum, research library, and office. The east barracks and the government house have been outlined by wood frames—a technique called ghosting—to provide a sense of their original size and form.

Fort de Chartres is the scene of several popular special events. Kids' Day, held the first weekend in May, features eighteenth-century games, contests, and crafts for children of all ages. The two-day Rendezvous,

held the first weekend in June, features military competition, dancing, music, and other activities. The first weekend in October marks the site's Seven Years' War event.

The Great Flood of '93

During the 1993 flood, Fort de Chartres was inundated by fifteen feet of water. The flood, which lasted nearly a month, severely damaged the fort and surrounding area. The site was refurbished with the help and hard work of volunteers and staff.



Fort de Chartres was underwater for nearly a month during the 1993 flood.

Additional Information

Fort de Chartres State Historic Site is open daily from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. It is closed for major winter holidays. There are no camping facilities. The Piethman Museum, concession, picnicking areas, and outdoor toilets are handicapped accessible.

For additional information, write Site Manager, Fort de Chartres Historic Site, 1350 State Route 155, Prairie du Rocher, IL 62277, or phone 618-284-7230.

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